



Northwest Regional Office

NOAA Fisheries



National Marine Fisheries Service

News Release

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Fisheries Service Announces Temporary Expanded No-Vessel Zone for Killer Whale Research

NOAA Fisheries' Northwest Fisheries Science Center today announced the creation of a temporary expanded "No-Vessel Zone" as part of a study to measure the potential effects of vessel presence on the behavior of Southern Resident killer whales. The study will compare observations of whale behavior with vessels present, operating in compliance with federal whale-watching guidelines, to behavior when vessels are not present.

To aid in data collection, the voluntary quarter-mile no-vessel zone, currently in place on the west side of San Juan Island, will be expanded to a half-mile in a radius around Edwards Point and extend north to Lime Kiln Lighthouse. The temporary expanded zone will be in place July 30-Sept. 30, 2003. NOAA Fisheries requests cooperation of the public during the experiment by honoring the expanded No-Vessel Zone. The current "BE WHALE WISE" whale-watching guidelines (<http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/mmammals/whales/guidelines1.pdf>) will remain in effect outside the no-vessel zone.

"We are not testing the merits of 1/4 mile versus 1/2 mile with this study" said Brad Hanson, research coordinator at the Science Center. "We want to ensure that we have an area that is free of vessel traffic in order to get a good comparative behavior sample for the observers who will be watching and collecting data from shore."

The Whale Watch Operators Association Northwest, the trade organization representing the top operators working in the inland waters, has agreed to steer clear of the experimental no-vessel zone to assist in the experiment.

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"It's part of our mission to support and assist in valid research projects," said association president Michael Bennett. "The Whale Watch Operators Association Northwest has an ongoing program of updating our best practices guidelines based on the best available science. Recent modifications to our guidelines include reducing noise by slowing down when within 1/2 mile of whales and shutting down motors when possible."

Vessel traffic is just one of several possible factors affecting the status of Southern Resident killer whales, which were designated as a depleted stock under the Marine Mammal Protection Act in May of this year. Other possible factors include stresses related to pollution and food availability and other factors outside of Puget Sound. The Northwest Fisheries Science Center has recently begun studies, and is also contracting with researchers to conduct studies, to close information gaps and help with conservation planning to recover the population.

Local killer whale researchers David Bain and Jodi Smith, and Canadian scientist Rob Williams, are lead scientists for the vessel study.

"This study will help us understand similarities and differences between whale behaviors, not only within this population of whales but between populations as well," Bain said. "Similar studies conducted previously in Canada suggested that vessels operating 100 yards from whales caused subtle behavioral changes in Northern Resident killer whales. We want to see whether similar behavior changes can be detected in the Southern Residents whales here in the San Juans."

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